

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewees: **Dr. Travis B. Reese**

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Interviewer: Pat Pollicoff

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

Project / Group: Henderson-Wessendorff Foundation

18 Pages



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*Transcript*

POLLICOFF: I am interviewing Mr. Travis Reese at 611 Morton St. Richmond, TX. This interview is being conducted by the Ft. Bend County Historical Commission and is part of the Ft. Bend County Historical Commission Oral History Project. We are here today at the request of the Henderson Wessendorf Foundation taking interviews related to family members.

Thank you for your help and also for your memories in advance. Let me start with the basics, tell me your name and date of birth.

REESE: Dr. Travis B. Reese.

POLLICOFF: Dr. of...

REESE: PHD

POLLICOFF: In what?

REESE: In agriculture and education.

POLLICOFF: From A&M?

REESE: A&M right [chuckle]

POLLICOFF: That was a good guess. [REESE chuckles]

REESE: I am a football letterman.

POLLICOFF: Are you really? So class of what?

REESE: Class of 45.

POLLICOFF: Class of 45 is a great class, very classic. The classic World War II class I think. Give me a brief outline to your connection to Ft. Bend County first.

REESE: Well, I came here to teach your vocational agriculture in 1946.

POLLICOFF: So that was after the war.

REESE: That was after the war, Au-ha.

POLLICOFF: Where did you grow up?

REESE: Rogers, Bell County TX. Just right outside of Temple.

POLLICOFF: When you first came here had you completed your Ph.D.?

REESE: No, I completed it a couple of three years later.

POLLICOFF: So you first came to Ft. Bend County in 1946? Tell me what you taught.

REESE: Vocational Agriculture

POLLICOFF: For...where were your classes?

REESE: High School, Lamar Consolidated High School.

POLLICOFF: How did you end up here?

REESE: Well, I just applied for the job and got it and came here [chuckle].

POLLICOFF: You didn't have any other family here at that time did you?

REESE: NO

POLLICOFF: No, but you have been here ever since?

REESE: Yes, Au-hum

POLLICOFF: So it was a good choice. You continued to do that kind of work all these years?

REESE: No, I quit teaching Vocational Agriculture at Lamar High School in 1971 I believe in or 72. Then I went out on my own. Buying and selling real estate.

POLLICOFF: All in this area?

REESE: Yes, well where ever...there was nothing here...

POLLICOFF: So, residential, commercial, ranch?

REESE: Mostly farm and ranch at the time.

POLLICOFF: Your family?

REESE: My mother and daddy lived in Rogers and when they quit farming they moved to Temple and died in Temple TX, which is just twelve miles away.

POLLICOFF: Were you married?

REESE: Yes, I married in 1946.

POLLICOFF: A girl from here or you met her some place else?

REESE: She was from Waco, but I went to high school with her. She was two grades behind me in high school.

POLLICOFF: So after the war...after school, you came back to her? What was her name?

REESE: Joan

POLLICOFF: Joan; how many children did you all have?

REESE: Two, a boy and a girl.

POLLICOFF: Born when?

REESE: The girl was born in 1950 I believe it was... yea, 50 and the boy was born in 60.

POLLICOFF: Your daughter's name is...

REESE: Connie Lea Blessed now.

POLLICOFF: Your son?

REESE: My son is dead now. He was killed in a snowmobile wreck in Montana. He had just been made vice-president of a big oil company and they went up to take care of the final business...they were moving it from there to Houston. He came to Houston, he had just been made vice-president of this oil company and he went back to Montana to close up the office and they were going to take one last snowmobile ride and he hit some loose snow. Threw him into a tree and killed him instantly.

POLLICOFF: Ah. How awful! What year was that?

REESE: Twenty three years ago. The reason I say that is his daughter...he never saw his daughter. He was born on the 28th of March and her birthday was the...fourteenth day of April of that same year. So he never got to see his daughter. She is precious to me, she is twenty three years old.

POLLICOFF: Nice. Tell me how you know the Henderson Wessendorf foundation? What is your connection?

REESE: Well...one of the first things that I did when I came to Rosenberg was build a house. Joe [Wessendorff's] daddy loaned me the money and it was a fascinating thing to me. The house didn't cost very much, I think 9,000 dollars and he said your payments are - so much a month. Just out of the top of his head without writing anything down. How in the world did you figure that out?. "Well at 6 percent and I have got every dollar memorized [Reese chuckles]. So I don't have to figure it."

POLLICOFF: What bank was it that you went to?

REESE: Personal

POLLICOFF: It was just a personal loan? How did you know Mr. Wessendorff,Sr.?

REESE: Well, Joe's daddy owned the lumber yard here and he was very active in what he did.

POLLICOFF: So right when you moved here you knew to go to the lumber company and ask for Mr. Wessendorf?

REESE: Yes, Au-Ha.

POLLICOFF: And that is the way it was done?

REESE: And bought the lumber from him to build the house. He said, "Do you need a loan?" "Yea." "I will loan you the money on that eight percent interest and the payments will be this much" And that was it.

POLLICOFF: And that was it. Did you build the house yourself?

REESE: Well I was...I didn't do a lot of the work but...I didn't have a contractor.

POLLICOFF: So that was your first introduction to Joe's father. When did you meet Joe Clyde?

REESE: I guess he was one of the first persons that I met when I came here. We have been friends ever since and partners by the way. We have probably been partners for thirty forty years.

POLLICOFF: You met his father first if you borrowed money for the house, right?

REESE: Yes, I got the money from the lumber yard to build the house. I first met Joe Clyde was in 1946.

POLLICOFF: Was he working for the lumber yard?

REESE: Oh, he was working everywhere. [chuckles] He was running the insurance agency and of course we had coffee together...we had coffee almost everyday.

POLLICOFF: So you just immediately hit it off.

REESE: Yea, Au-hum.

POLLICOFF: Well describe that first meeting. How you met him.

REESE: He didn't have his office at that time. I think it was down at the lumber yard when I first met him, when I was building that house. He of course he...Joe Clyde was at the lumber yard pretty often. Kind of overseeing things, not selling lumber necessarily but that was our first meeting. First time to talk very much anyway. And we talked ever since [chuckle].

POLLICOFF: You immediately struck a cord with each other? Obviously you were teaching at Lamar.

REESE: Yes

POLLICOFF: You guys became close friends and when did you become partners? How did that come about?

REESE: Probably the first deal that we had was five or six years later. I don't remember what the deal was but it was a real estate purchase incentive. We bought and sold property and carried our notes and that sort of thing.

POLLICOFF: So you were able to make enough money as a teacher to start delving into real estate?

REESE: Yea. Well I borrowed money [chuckle].

POLLICOFF: That's how the smart people do it. So you first became friends and then partners. It started with the real estate deals and then where did it go from there?

REESE: It was always real estate. One of the most successful partnerships we had was all Aggies. He was the class of...38...yea 38, I think it was. We were all A&M people and we would buy a tract of land, say a 100 acres or 200 acres or what ever it was, and divide it up into five, ten or fifteen acre tracts and sell it with financing for fifteen years.

After he [Joe Clyde] built the bank here, he was downtown and came in for coffee. He said, "I'm mad. We made more money on that one partnership than we made in the bank for this whole year." [REESE chuckles]

POLLICOFF: When you all bought these properties were they former farm and ranch area land or in town or a combination?

REESE: Always out of town but close to town. We would divide it up into whatever number of acres we would sell. For example something real close to town we would sell for more per acre than something fifteen miles out of town. That kind of told us what size tracts to sell. We sell the cheaper land from bigger tracts but all of them about the same amount of payments.

POLLICOFF: The land that you sold was developed into what?

REESE: Mostly a home would be put on it. If they bought ten acres for example they would have a house and then they would have a garden and they'd have some agriculture activity going on. We didn't have anything to loose if somebody didn't make a payment we'd take it back. But hardly ever did we have to ever take anything back. If they got into a financial crisis we made some sort of deal where they could miss a payment or two and they'd catch up on it and the reputation went along with it.

POLLICOFF: What do you think was one of your best deals that you all ever partnered on?

REESE: Well, I kind of think the one when I mentioned that we made more money than the bank [chuckles].

POLLICOFF: When was that?

REESE: Gosh, I would say about 1980.

POLLICOFF: Where was it located?

REESE: Well, some of it this county. A lot of it was in Missouri County and a good bit of it was in Liberty County. Some of it was in different counties. We tried to stay fairly close to where we could get to it if we needed [chuckles]. We went into a business deal but we didn't have anything written.

POLLICOFF: It was always a handshake deal?

REESE: Yea. Didn't need to write anything down. Never had a bit of problems.

POLLICOFF: Well, that speaks volumes for the kind of man he was.

REESE: Yea. Sure does.

POLLICOFF: Will you describe him to me? Tell me what he was like.

REESE: He was easy going. Enthusiastic about everything. There was no in-between. He liked it a whole lot or he didn't like it. [chuckles]

POLLICOFF: But if he committed to it he was in it.

REESE: If he was committed to it he like it. To give you an example, we bought a bank one time and operated it for a number of years.

POLLICOFF: Here in town?

REESE: No, it was Bellville. The First National Bank of Bellville. After we bought it we made him Chairman of the Board, we still had the president that was running the bank. We owned the bank for several years. Finally a group of people that were local bought it from us. The bank was broke, really, when we bought it and we got a good deal on it.

POLLICOFF: So were you on the board of the bank?

REESE: Yes, Au-hum.

POLLICOFF: The relationship began in 1946 and lasted thru your lifetime...his lifetime.

REESE: Until he died. We had things going even when he died.

POLLICOFF: What role did you play?

REESE: I sold the land mostly and found a lot of the land that we bought.

POLLICOFF: So you'd just go out and find the tracts.

REESE: Yes, and people would come to me too.

POLLICOFF: Now did you all office together?

REESE: No, had our own offices. We had coffee here at his office just about everyday.

POLLICOFF: That was the daily coffee.

REESE: Right [chuckle] 1946 until he died. And I went to see him when he was in the hospital.

POLLICOFF: Over 60 years even when he was in the hospital. What did you know about his other work life?

REESE: I pretty well knew what all he did. He would tell me what he was doing.

POLLICOFF: He was quite a sportsman. Did you guys hunt or fish together.

REESE: I never fished in my life but we hunted together.

POLLICOFF: You did hunt. Well, tell me about that. Where did you guys go hunting.

REESE: We'd go bird hunting, you know. Now that was mostly our hunting. We didn't go hunt deer together.

POLLICOFF: So dove hunting and ducks?

REESE: Mostly dove. And he was a good shot by the way. Most of the time we'd go out places that we still had... still owned and hadn't sold.

POLLICOFF: Were you members of any of the organizations with him? Whether it was Morton Cemetery or the Calvary Church or Polly Ryon Hospital. Did you work with any of those organizations?

REESE: No I didn't. I bought a building. The First National Bank Building in downtown Rosenberg at that same time and I still have it. Still there on the corner. As I said, I am almost ninety years old and I still work everyday. Seven days a week. I meet so many people that when you retire take a thirty day vacation come home and sit there and watch that television all day and all night and would be dead in a year, so I wasn't going to take that route [chuckle].

POLLICOFF: What are some of your most vivid memories of Joe.

REESE: I had so many vivid memories, I don't think I could pick out one...directly.

POLLICOFF: Would it be more with his business or your personal relationship with him maybe?

REESE: I think it would be more business. But we had a lot of personal...he and I both like guns. I had a gun license...so we bought guns [chuckle].

POLLICOFF: You bought a lot of guns together?

REESE: Yea [chuckle]

POLLICOFF: I know he was a good shot. He has always been described as a really excellent marksman.

REESE: Yea, he sure was yea.

POLLICOFF: It was really his love of hunting and the outdoors?

REESE: Yea, he loved to hunt. I don't know he was all that much of a fisherman, but he sure did like to hunt. I had a gun license that's why I could sell and buy guns. I bought a bunch for him and got it at my price [chuckle].

POLLICOFF: Sounds like a good deal. Were your families close?

REESE: Not so much because we were so busy doing what we were doing [chuckle]. Of course we visited back and forth. My wife and his wife.

POLLICOFF: Who were your usual group of suspects that you would get together and invest in some property.

REESE: I would say the four of us. Joe Clyde, myself, Byron W. Frierson, who was head of the Ag. Department of the Texas Prison System and D. Ray Alford, who had his own ranch in Brazoria county. We did probably more deals together than anybody else.

Each time we would buy a tract of land we would name it after either the person we bought it from or the community that it was in or something like that. We didn't have a name per se for the group. That was the group that was so successful it made more money than the bank.

POLLICOFF: How did you all gravitate together?

REESE: We just kind of gravitated together because someone would come up, "I found a tract of land. Here is 402 acres. What do you all think about it?" We'd decide we either wanted it or didn't want it. It had to be dividable.

POLLICOFF: In your times together with Joe what do you think were the most important things in his life?

REESE: People. People were very important and family was very important to Joe. When we bought that bank in Bellville, Joe had to read everything that went on in the bank. He said you know my family name is in this bank. He got to looking and it was his grandfather or great grandfather who was on the board of directors of bank...the First National Bank in Bellville. He was really enthused about that. He took pictures of everything. He...is very family oriented.

POLLICOFF: He was always known by you and others as a man of his word.

REESE: Oh yes, I wouldn't even sign a contract with him. His word was all you needed and he remembered what he said or didn't say [chuckle]. So you didn't have to worry about it [laughter].

POLLICOFF: Did he ever talk about his World War II experiences with you?

REESE: Very little. Just very little.

POLLICOFF: You served too. Where did you serve?

REESE: I went to Ft. Benning, Georgia. Officers Training School and got hurt. And spent eight months in the hospital never did go overseas.

POLLICOFF: Hurt in training, oh. Did he ever talk his experience at all?

REESE: Not really.

POLLICOFF: A lot of vets didn't.

REESE: Well, a lot of vets will, and he said...that's my business. He was a more private person than you would imagine. I will tell you one experience...I wrote a book... I have written several books...but I wrote a book about my mother and daddy. My mothers name was Minnie and Albert was my daddy's name. It was called 'Minnie and Albert' and you know his [Joe Clyde's] mother went blind. She lived out here at the edge of town. Joe read my book and he was telling his mother about it. She said, "I sure would like to read that book, but I am blind." He came back for morning coffee and said she sure would like to have somebody read that book. I said, "Well, I will read it to her." So I went out to where they live and I read that book. A couple of readings, you know after several pages...she was into everything...of course she was big in education. Going blind just kept her from reading it has got to be a bad thing for anybody.

But anyway I read that thing. She was telling Joe how much she enjoyed the book being read to her. I said, "I don't mind reading to her if you'll get some books I'll read to her." You know I live right at the edge of town here. So I thought about it, going down and borrowing books out of the Library. He went down there and bought seven or eight books or something like that. Let her pick out the ones she wants read to her, and I read. [laughter].

POLLICOFF: That's great, so you would go down and read to her?

REESE: Usually once a week, to read to her. They had dogs and cats and stuff out at their place and when one of them got sick she carried out to the vet. She was behind all that and she missed it by being blind.

POLLICOFF: What did she love to read? What books did you read, do you remember?

REESE: She loved that book that I wrote. That is the kind of thing she liked, she was a people person, very much like Joe was.

POLLICOFF: Tell me about Loise. How well did you know Loise?

REESE: Pretty well. I did all of her apprising and came up with the values for her cousin on a tract of land in Houston and appraised all of her property before and after she died.

POLLICOFF: The properties she had in like Blanco and other places?

REESE: Yea, Au-Ha That is in three counties, by the way. That one tract [chuckle].

POLLICOFF: Oh was it? So it's Blanco and what else? What are the three counties. You can't remember?

REESE: I can't remember what they were, but not too far from Austin. Go up the highway and take off and get to it that way...one of the counties only had like 70 acres or something like that. One of which had a river running through it. She built a bunch of houses for the church to use.

POLLICOFF: For the retreat.

REESE: Au-Hum the retreat.

POLLICOFF: What other properties did you help her with?

REESE: She had a cousin that lived in Houston and, it sounds unbelievable, owned fifty or sixty acres of land right in downtown Houston.

POLLICOFF: Which cousin was this? Do you know?

REESE: I don't remember her name just off hand. Anyway she wanted me to go down and look at the tract of land and her husband was an attorney and he had died but he had it fixed up so that when both of them died it would go to this church, this association. I think she was ninety-three at the time, but anyway they were wanting the land to go to this church. Loise hired me to go down and talk to them she wasn't going to sell it for anything until she died, she didn't want to be pushed out the window of the Martha Stewart building [chuckle] either.

Anyway that lasted for a while; Loise was kind of different. One time my wife and I went to see her. She came out with a couple of real expensive toys. You know play things. She said, "I got these two things for you, just appreciate it." I said, "I don't want that." "Well your going to have it anyways." I said, "No, I don't play that." Well, when I got in the car there they were.

POLLICOFF: She was insistent.

REESE: Very...and she wanted things done when she wanted it done and how she wanted it done. But we got along just great. We didn't have a bit of trouble. The reason she was trying to give me something was because everything came out just like it ought to in Houston, it was that tract of land.

POLLICOFF: So she was obviously very appreciative.

REESE: Au-Hum.

POLLICOFF: So did you not charge her and that is why she was trying to pay you with toys?

REESE: No I charged her the regular fee, but it was just something else she wanted to do. She couldn't do enough for you if she liked you. If she didn't [chuckle] she wouldn't of course.

POLLICOFF: I heard she was kind of a sergeant in a lot of ways. Is that a good way description?

REESE: Yea, but I never had a bit of trouble with her.

POLLICOFF: I heard she was generous woman and others have said that she was very much a business woman, very sharp and very demanding.

REESE: Of course, she was an only child you know and her daddy had all kinds of money, well he had forty thousand acres. That tells you how big he was. And she ended up with it, she and Joe.

POLLICOFF: Were you members of any of the organizations maybe that she was involved in at all?

REESE: Not...not really not to any extent like Joe and she was... you know they had a wing...the Wessendorff wing at the hospital. It is still over there of course they were very upset that they changed the name of the hospital. Polly Ryon...

POLLICOFF: Oak Bend doesn't have the same ring.

REESE: [chuckle]

POLLICOFF: Well it is not the same historical ring. What would you say were Joe's and Loise's... their legacy. Joe in particular his legacy, his families legacy in Ft. Bend County?

REESE: He was the tops of everything. Whatever he did was done the best it could be done and I think that is the biggest legacy that you can talk about. You want something that's kind of funny?

POLLICOFF: Sure, absolutely

REESE: You know he had land all over the county and out of the county. He never had a single oil well, not one. No gas wells and here...

POLLICOFF: Is there a reason for that?

REESE: The land that he owned...he'd lease it but they would never drill a well on it, and that bugged him, because here I'd come in...stuff I had in Orchard had seven wells. "Don't tell me that"...type of thing. Almost on a daily basis he would bring up the fact that he didn't have a well or didn't have any income from a well. He had a tract of land he got close to Corpus. Eight hundred acres and had it leased...didn't drill a well. The four of us that bought and sold stuff together bought a tract of land in Brazoria County, I don't know four or five hundred acres and kept half of the minerals and we hadn't sold that land thirty days until the oil company wanted to drill a well on this and they had to pick out a spot. They had a well...it was a pretty good well to.

My check...now there is four of us all of us got the same thing. My check was four hundred and ninety five dollars. So everybody's check was that. So I rushed over here to tell Joe the good news if he hadn't already got it. He said, "I don't believe...I have bought and sold land all my life and I have never had any oil and you guys are always getting some oil. When am I going to get a check?" I pulled out that check...I never will forget it. It was four hundred and ninety five dollars. "This is the check I got this morning, haven't you gotten yours?" "No! No!" He didn't normally get excited, but he got excited about that. Which meant nothing to him, that four hundred and ninety-five dollars.

Well about this time they came thru with the mail. Here is Joe expecting a check from an oil company. He just tore it open, here is that check for four hundred and ninety five dollars. He went all thru the office waiving that check, 'I finally got an oil check!'"[laughter]. I can remember that just like it happened today.

POLLICOFF: That's great. So he left his mark on this county in a lot of ways.

REESE: He did, he did. He sure did and by the way they hit oil on his place at the Kennedy. And when his estate was appraised there were no cattle, but there were oil lines, oil well lines running all where the roads used to be. [chuckle]

POLLICOFF: He would have loved that.

REESE: His first check was well over a million dollars.

POLLICOFF: This was after he died?

REESE: After he died.

POLLICOFF: So he didn't even get to appreciate it?

REESE: He had been dead several years before that happened. That happened this last year.

POLLICOFF: I'll be darned. I'll be darned. So this foundation and the good works that he and his wife...

REESE: Now they have been doing that all along. For example you've got Wessendorff wing at the hospital. They did that several years ago but...

POLLICOFF: But he was a modest man, I understand.

REESE: He never bragged about anything. He was modest. And very definite in what he did. You know, he didn't just say, "I am going to do that", he studied it a little bit and after that he would say, "I've studied it a little bit." [chuckles].

POLLICOFF: So he was...

REESE: Very unusual man.

POLLICOFF: Well, he ran so many different kinds of companies too. Did you see him primarily being interested in one or another or was he pretty much an expert in all the different companies he ran?

REESE: No, he spread his money and his talent to a bunch of different areas. I kind of think he was more interested in banking than he was anything else because he owned several banks or had an interest in several banks and he was...of course he liked a whole bunch of things.

POLLICOFF: But the banking and probably also his land. He obviously loved the ranching operations.

REESE: Yes, well of course that's...every time he found a tract of land he bought it, [chuckle] that he liked you know. Especially close to his home place.

POLLICOFF: Something he could drive to. Like Bellville that was pretty close.

REESE: Yes, one hour exactly [chuckles]

POLLICOFF: Anything else about Joe or Loise that you'd like to share?

REESE: Well I had coffee with him everyday. He never changed. Whatever he said was gospel. I am not saying he was just telling things all the time, but you got advice if you was sitting next to him...talking to him or sitting in the same office with him.

POLLICOFF: Are you proud to call him one of your closest friends?

REESE: Oh yes! And an every day friend. It wasn't just once a month or something. It was pretty every day except for Sunday.

POLLICOFF: You would consider them very influential in helping the community?

REESE: Oh yea! They were very considerate of the community and helped everyway that they could.

POLLICOFF: I understand that he always had an eye out for the little guy. Was that your experience as well?

REESE: Yep, Au-Hum.

POLLICOFF: Did you ever witness that?

REESE: Yes, I did.

POLLICOFF: In what way?

REESE: People would be hard up for something and they'd come to Joe or her either and if they weren't a drunkard or off-key someplace they got help. I don't know if off-key is the right term but you know being good solid citizens except for the bad times they had. They helped a lot of people.

POLLICOFF: If you were to describe what the most important thing that he stood for, that he loved in his community. How would you describe that?

REESE: He wanted to treat everybody the same and everybody good and everybody well and you can't say that about everybody. He was not an 'I' person. He could very well have been that with all his money and his experience and his ability and his thinking and the things he did in the community. But he wasn't that way at all, he was just a good...just a good ole Joe.

POLLICOFF: I think it says a lot that he came back here also after college. Do you know, why he decided to come back to the Richmond, Ft. Bend County area? What was it about this place that really made him feel so important to give back...

REESE: Family, his mother and daddy were from here and I think you would have to take a jack hammer and get after him with it to keep him from coming back here. He felt that strong about it.

POLLICOFF: Clearly, he gave a lot back to the community that he loved.

REESE: Just a whale of a lot. And he helped a lot of people and he helped a lot of people that didn't know that they were being helped too.

POLLICOFF: And they didn't know that he did help because...

REESE: Because he didn't let them know. You know somebody is sick, he would pay the doctor bill for and never let on that he did it or she did it.

POLLICOFF: And he did this often?

REESE: Often.

POLLICOFF: A remarkable man.

REESE: He was a remarkable man.